



**Fostering Relationships, Trust, Communication and
Competition within a System**

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Fostering Relationships, Trust, Communication, and Competition within a System

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“System” can be defined as a set of interacting or interdependent entities, real or abstract, forming an integrated whole (Wikipedia, Jan. 2009). There is no doubt that the entities within a university system interact, but are they interdependent? There is likely not one answer to this question, and certainly there are numerous opinions and an infinite number of different characteristics of systems (university or otherwise). But there are commonalities among systems and best practices within that framework. This essay seeks to explore the unique nature of one system and the commonalities that may exist. We will also discuss and hypothesize about best practices within this organizational framework.

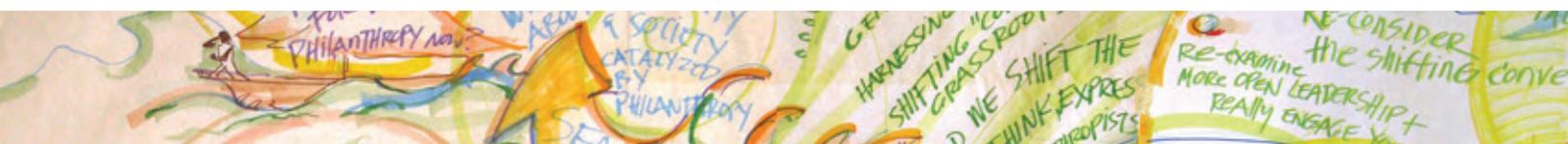
The elements within any system must interact, and interact often. They also behave certain ways, simply because they are a part of a system. There is a natural tension in a system, and an expected competitive spirit. This description reminds me of the family dynamic in which siblings compete for most loved, highest achieving, and most successful at winning resources. It seems to me that there is a healthy and an unhealthy dynamic within systems. It is not personality-driven necessarily, but rather how the “parents” set boundaries, expectations, rewards, and punishments. Healthy competition can exist if the goals and rules are clear and they remain consistent.

There are any number of ways a system may be structured. I am most familiar with the structure that has a statewide system office and three major administrative units (MAUs). Organizational charts are important in any bureaucratic organization, so we rely upon the picture depicted on that piece of paper to determine how we act and react in certain circumstances. There is obviously an organizational chart within each piece of the system too, adding layers to that concept. Such charts also include solid and dotted lines as well as formal and informal relationships and power seats, which are all equally important.

The question of loyalty and who one reports to comes up often in conversations within our organization. Those questions don’t come from a place of insecurity, but rather from a place of genuine concern. Who do we seek to please and do right by? Is it the system office or our Chancellor? We have frequent, often daily, contact with various counterparts within the system office, and that contact often sets the tone, creates the rules, and establishes our boundaries. Depending on the circumstances, the effect of that contact can make us dig our heels in, declaring that if that’s the way “they” want to handle a certain project or area, we’ll drop it and find another priority area to focus on. So, the system can dictate our priorities, but we don’t work for the system. We work for the Chancellor who says this is a priority for this MAU, right? You can see the conundrum.

Constant conflict results when the system does any of the following:

- Takes over a project (e.g., sees a promising MAU specific idea and steps in to assume control, reapplying the idea systemwide to the whole system)
- Changes the rules midway
- Sets boundaries that are too restrictive (e.g., a no-contact mandate with corporate donors who live within our small city’s boundaries)
- Maintains inconsistent policies among MAUs (e.g., there may be no such mandate in regard to another MAU’s local corporate donors)



Where does the responsibility and authority really lie within a system? And where does your loyalty reside as an advancement leader? Chances are, it is with the entity that issues your paycheck and with the person who conducts your annual performance review. The system may argue that without the other parts of the system (or without the system office itself), there would be no paychecks at all, but we could go around in circles about this inconclusively.

Sometimes we feel strong, independent, and successful within our system; sometimes we feel powerless “against” the system. Do they make all the rules? Do we have any say? When a system removes the autonomy of any of its parts through any of the actions described earlier, it is often a disaster that creates discontent, distrust, and sometimes rogue behavior that is ultimately unproductive for all.

Fostering strong relationships within the system is one key to success. Your relationships help you navigate the system, and adept navigation can often lead to success within the system and victory for your organization too (imagine that!). These relationships must be based on honesty and trust, and those principles are as important in this context as they are in every other area of life. I must admit, however, that in my role, I am often forced to play all sides of issues. It’s an uncomfortable, dangerous, and complicated game, but as we seek to gather as much information as possible about a particular situation, we are forced to call upon all of our interpersonal skills to woo such information from our colleagues across the system. We use that information to help us achieve success. That definition of success is often different for the various elements in a system and that’s where the moral quandary often lies. Are we appropriately using our relationships within the system for this purpose, or is it inappropriate manipulation of the system?

Communication is also of paramount importance. I propose that it’s even more important in the system context, because of the natural sense of competition that exists. If you don’t communicate what you are doing, then your actions may be perceived as subversive in some way, and will therefore undermine those strong relationships you’ve worked so long to cultivate in order to achieve your goals. I find that communication within the system is a job in and of itself. It is detailed and difficult work to develop the strategy behind how and when you communicate what and to whom. It is also work that’s essential to success. I have learned the hard way about not communicating enough and have yet to identify a situation in which I’ve communicated too much.

The style of your communication depends on who you are talking to, and will be determined in some part by the strength and quality of your relationships. Friendly and open communication that’s suitable for dialogue works best. This reinforces the sense of trust by way of consultation and feedback gathering as you move through the process. The trick is communicating openly while also staking your own territory, defending your turf, and making your goals known to everyone.

At the successful completion a project, everyone in the system will celebrate that success. This lays the groundwork for future successes. If others are not aware of what you are doing and a “surprise success” comes your way, it may be celebrated at one campus, but you risk having that project be dissected and torn down if others were unaware or uninvolved. I do believe that the location where success is celebrated is important. If the system behaves as it should, then the various successes of its parts will be celebrated at all levels, which helps everyone pull together as one unit and together raise the bar on that success. This promotes genuine interest in seeing the whole system be successful, rather than maintaining the equal treatment of all the “kids” by letting one succeed one year and then holding that one back so that another can have a chance. That creates distrust and dysfunction within the system.

While there is natural tension and competition within the system, there can be constructive competition through the fostering of healthy rivalry and success seeking. Success

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for one part of a system does not have to mean failure for another part. Establishing clear expectations, achieving consistent and clear communications from all parties, and striving for rock-solid relationships based on trust help all of this occur. In the systems context so described, these become the three best practices for advancement leaders to pursue.



About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com. This essay is an extract from that publication.

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